

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Lt . Gen. Lloyd Austin III, commander, Multi-National Corps Iraq, August 18, 2008

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good morning and welcome. And thank you for showing up this morning so bright and early. Let me just make sure that General Austin can hear me okay.

General Austin, Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon.

GEN. AUSTIN: Good morning, Bryan.

MR. WHITMAN: Again, thank you, general. And good afternoon to you.

It is a privilege to have our briefer today, Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, who is the commanding general of Multinational Corps Iraq -- he assumed command on February 14th of this year -- and, as such, directs the operations of approximately 150,000 joint and coalition forces in all sectors of Iraq. He is not a stranger to Iraq. He previously served in Iraq as the deputy commanding general of the 3rd Infantry Division from March to May of 2003.

And I think this is the second time that General Austin has done this type of briefing with us. Hopefully we will have the opportunity to do many more during his tour. He is talking to us today from Camp Victory in Baghdad. And as is our custom, he is going to give you a brief overview of what's going on and then take some of your questions.

So General Austin, welcome, and thank you again.

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, thank you, Bryan, for the introduction. And good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

I'd like to take just a couple of minutes to provide a quick statement. And I look forward to entertaining some of your questions at the end.

Let me say up front that our mission in Iraq has not changed. Our number one task remains protecting the Iraqi population. We're also focused on developing a capable and professional Iraqi security force and helping to build civil capacity.

And we're making progress in each of these areas every day. And while these efforts are progressing at a different pace, they're all moving forward in a positive and tangible manner.

Today, the Multinational Corps Iraq is operating in more areas of the country with fewer troops, and our security gains continue to trend in a positive direction even after the redeployment of five brigade combat teams, and most recently the Georgian brigade.

We've been able to achieve this success because of an increasingly effective Iraqi security force, one that is growing in capability and in confidence. And as a result, we have seen signs of hope and prosperity return to many parts of the country that were once previously threatened by criminals and terrorists and others who don't want Iraq to achieve its full potential.

For 10 of the last 11 weeks, we've sustained less than 200 attacks per week nationwide. It is undeniable that Iraq is in a much better place than it was several months ago. And we're very encouraged by these positive trends, but we realize that there remain threats to the population and there is still much work to be done.

In the north, al Qaeda is in disarray, and its capability to conduct well-planned and coordinated attacks is limited, but they still pose a real threat to the population. And a couple of weeks ago, I walked through an open market in Mosul that was several kilometers long, and it was overflowing with Iraqis. Now that's something that would not have been possible just a couple of months ago, and this is a clear sign that we are making progress indeed.

We must, however, keep sight of the fact that al Qaeda retains the capability to perform high-profile attacks on the population. Suicide vests, which are a trademark of al Qaeda, account for less than 3 percent of the total number all of all attacks, but they account for 65 percent of all casualties. And most of those casualties are innocent civilians. So you can see that while al Qaeda is in disarray, they are still capable of ruthless attacks.

Iraqi-led operations in the north, specifically in Mosul and in Diyala, are directed at the remnants of al Qaeda. In addition, our operations along the borders are directed at interdicting foreign fighters from flowing in and regenerating the al Qaeda leadership, and we'll continue to pursue them wherever they are as long as they pose a threat to the Iraqi population.

In Baghdad, we're seeing life steadily return to normal as well, and al Qaeda has been largely pushed out of the city. Today we're experiencing 83 percent fewer attacks than during the same time last year. In Sadr City, there's been improvement in terms of security, and the government of Iraq is beginning to provide essential services to its citizens. They've begun several projects that are providing essential services like sewer, electrical, health facilities, security and other services.

And debris is being removed, and roads are being repaired and opened, and solar-powered street lights are going up. And the results are indeed remarkable.

You know, Sadr City is a great example of the work that's ongoing to help provide the Iraqi people the basic services that will improve their quality of life. And families are walking the streets, and markets are open, and the quality life is improving on a daily basis. And I've seen similar progress across the rest of the country as well.

As you look to the south, you will also see an improved security situation. Since the Iraqi security forces began operations in the south last March, and caused many special groups' leaders to flee to Iran, the Iraqi security force has been increasingly successful in isolating the special groups, which is the principal threat in the south. As a result of the improved security in places like Basra and Amarah, we're seeing fewer numbers of lethal accelerants making their way into Baghdad. Today these militias are largely disrupted and ineffective because of Iraqi operations and because the people have turned against them, much like the Anbaris turned against al Qaeda in the west a year ago. And even though we anticipate that some of these leaders will attempt to return soon, we know that they will be returning to a much less permissive environment.

The Iraqi security forces have gained valuable experience through their operations in Basra and Sadr City, Mosul, Amarah and now in Diyala. And the operations in Diyala are some of the best Iraqi-planned and executed operations to date. And this is impressive because the Iraqi security forces are growing and training all while fighting an insurgency.

In closing, let me say that Iraq is indeed a very proud country, and the people of Iraq from Mosul to Baghdad to Basra want a prosperous future, and they fully recognize that al Qaeda and special groups criminals are firmly against their collective goals for this country. And I strongly believe that Iraq will be successful because the Iraqi security forces are improving, and because the people have trust in their security forces, and because we're committed to helping the government of Iraq improve their civil capacity.

And finally, I'd like to say that I remain absolutely impressed with the commitment and the professionalism of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, as well as our coalition partners. Their hard work continues to have a positive impact on the lives of the Iraqis. There's still much work to be done, but we're making steady progress every day. And there are clearly some tough days ahead, and some tough issues that will have to be resolved. But I'm really confident that we will continue to move in a positive direction, and I'm truly excited about what the future holds for this country.

So thank you very much. And now I'll take a few of your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, general.

And we'll get started right here with Tom Bowman.

Q General, it's Tom Bowman, with NPR. I wonder if you could address Anbar province. It was supposed to turn over to Iraqi control the end of June. And there are reports that the Iraqis don't want to accept control of Anbar because they're afraid large numbers of Marines will leave. Could you address that?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, I can tell you that our forces have continued to make progress in working with the Iraqi government, provincial government out in Anbar.

They've had tremendous help from the people. The police forces have evolved over time, and they're doing a really good job.

We have a great working relationship with the people of Anbar, and we have assured them that we'll be there for as long as it takes to ensure that things continue to stabilize and we have sustainable security. So while someone may have said that, I think that they fully appreciate the fact that we are here to support the Iraqi government. And I truly believe that most of the leaders of Anbar are confident in that -- in that matter.

Q Can you tell us why it hasn't changed over to Iraqi control? We're a month and a half after it was supposed to happen. And what's the hold-up?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, I think that when the ceremony will take place is a question that will have to be resolved between the provincial government and the government of Iraq. And I'm confident that it will be resolved between those two and announced by the government of Iraq.

And so as you enter into one of those -- into the PIC process, there's an agreement that has to be worked out in terms of the future operating rules, and so some final points are still being negotiated on that agreement. And I'm confident that we'll make progress in the future.

MR. WHITMAN: Al, go ahead.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. I know that you and General Petraeus are now in the period of assessment. I wonder if you could share with us -- I see you smiling. You know -- you knew this was coming, I guess. Can you share with us your at least general feeling about how low you can go? You said security's been sustained with the withdrawals you've already had. What more do you think you can do, say, by the end of the year?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, sir, as you know, we've always been clear that, you know, we'll make our recommendations based upon the conditions on the ground at the time when we have to provide those recommendations.

And those recommendations will be based upon an assessment of the enemy capability and activity, the capacity and capability of the Iraqi security forces and also the capability of the coalition forces, not just the U.S. forces but the entire coalition.

And so at the point that we make those recommendations, we'll take all of those things into consideration. And General Petraeus and I are in continual dialogue about these issues. And I'll make a recommendation to him. And at some point, he will make a recommendation to the leadership, at Central Command and in Washington.

But again it is a continual process of assessing the conditions on the ground, what we're faced with and our ability to provide the level of security necessary to continue to

move forward. And we have seen some progress, some significant progress over the last several weeks, last several months.

We'd like to sustain that progress especially as we go into provincial elections and later into national elections next year. And so again we'll take all of those things into consideration. And we'll make the recommendation to our leadership at the appropriate time.

Q General, based on what you see today, do you feel like you could lose more combat brigades or battalions, between now and the end of the year, and still sustain security?

GEN. AUSTIN: Based upon what I see today, again, I'm always encouraged by what our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are causing to happen and the things that they're doing, working with the Iraqi security forces, to improve conditions on a daily basis.

If conditions continue to improve, absolutely, that presents some opportunities for us. But again we're not making that recommendation today. We'll make that recommendation at some point in the future. And that will be based upon what we're looking at at that point.

Q General, David Wood from the Baltimore Sun.

Could you give us a status report on the Sons of Iraq program; how many you've got nationwide, how many you envision being absorbed into the Iraqi security forces by the end of the year? And what are you going to do with the rest of them?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, a couple of weeks ago, we had about 101,000. Today, we're down to a little over 99,000. And the reason that that number has reduced is because some of those Sons of Iraq we've helped to find jobs. Others have been either wounded and some have lost their lives in the process of helping us to provide security for the country; helping us to help the Iraqis provide security for the country.

I just had a meeting with the prime minister, on Saturday, on the issue of the Sons of Iraq.

And I can tell you that, you know, from that meeting and other meetings that I've had with him previously, he is committed to helping the people that have helped us provide for an increased level of security.

What we will look to do with the Sons of Iraq is to place about 20 percent of them into security force positions with the police or the army. And then the remainder of those Sons of Iraq's -- Sons of Iraq we hope to help find jobs, meaningful jobs that can help them provide for their families.

And we're committed to helping the people that have helped us. And you know, we're working hard along with the -- with the government officials from Iraq to move this process along. And I really -- I feel very confident, again, that the prime minister is committed to helping and I think we'll have a measured process of transitioning people from security -- the security line of work into civilian jobs over time.

Q Do you have a timetable that you're aiming at?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, you know, it's very difficult to lay a timetable out on when you're going to be able to transition all the Sons of Iraq, because as you're placing people into jobs, you have to create those jobs for people to go into.

I can tell you, we'll transition them as quickly as we can in a smooth and measured fashion so that we can still provide for security and ensure that people have meaningful jobs. So, I mean, it'll take us some time to be able to do that, but we'll transition them as soon -- as fast as is feasible.

Q Kimberly Dozier with CBS News. Sir, you mentioned that there were fewer lethal accelerants coming up from the south to Baghdad and creating violence. I assume you mean units trained by Iran. One of your military analysts gave an on-the-record interview last week and spoke of hit squads spread throughout the country that have been trained in four bases in Iran. Can you give us some more detail on that -- (off mike) -- Iraqi targets?

GEN. AUSTIN: First of all, I don't know of any analysts that have given on-the-record interviews, but I don't claim to know everything.

By lethal accelerants, what I mean is munitions and weapons, such as explosively formed penetrators or EFPs. And as you know, those are IEDs that are anti-armor IEDs that have the ability to penetrate our armored vehicles. And they are absolutely -- they've been absolutely lethal on the battlefield.

And we've seen a number of rockets that have moved from the southern region up into the Baghdad area, and we saw a lot of those rockets last March. In the last several months, we've seen a much decreased flow of those types of weapons, in part because we've been very successful in finding a number of caches that had large stores of those types of munitions and weapons. We've taken those off the battlefield. And we've also taken off -- taken a number of people who were using those weapons off the battlefield, and so that's greatly improved the security situation.

Q (Off mike) -- address, the units that might be trained in Iran, what sort of violence they're presenting?

GEN. AUSTIN: As the security improved in the south, in places like Sadr City and in Basra, we saw that the leadership of the special groups criminal elements left the

country, and we think that they went into Iran for additional training and to be resourced. And we expect that those leaders will try to come back at some point in time in the future. When they come back, we hope that they'll find a much changed environment, an environment that's a lot more hostile to their types of activities.

And what will cause that change, I think, is a change in attitude of the people. You know, over the last several months, the people have been able to enjoy a much more peaceful environment. I think the people appreciate that. I think they want a better way of life. They have hope for a better way of life. And so the types of activities that these leaders bring to the neighborhoods and the provinces I don't think will be as welcomed as they were in the past. And so if they do try to come back in, we will do everything within our power to pursue them and hopefully interdict their ability to do the same types of things they were doing before.

Q Thank you. General, it's Thom Shanker from The New York Times. Thank you for your time this morning.

A few moments ago, in your discussion about the variables that will affect troop levels, you mentioned elections. As the Iraqi government appears unable to schedule provincial and national elections, will that prevent you from recommending troop reductions? I ask because, as you are no doubt aware, all of your predecessors at MNC-I have found ways to boost troops levels around the time of elections.

GEN. AUSTIN: While certainly the ability to help the Iraq security forces maintain an environment that will provide for safe and secure elections is one of the pieces that will enter into the calculus of figuring out what our troop strength should be going into late fall -- that along with the threat that will exist and the capability of the Iraqi security forces and of course, again, our coalition footprint -- but certainly that is one of the things that we'll have to consider as we go into late fall.

Q Hi, general. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News.

When you answered Tom Bowman's question earlier, about transitioning Anbar to provincial Iraqi control, you said that the agreement wasn't yet finalized; there were still details to work out. Several weeks ago, we were told that it was a dust storm that was the delay in this PIC transition.

What's the reality here? Was the agreement never really finalized?

GEN. AUSTIN: At that point, it was, I think. But since then, they've gone in to work out some more details that they would have liked to have seen worked out. And that was, in fact, what delayed the ceremony at that point in time. It was a dust storm. And so again as the provincial government and the government of Iraq work things out, they will announce the scheduling of the ceremony. And I'll leave that to them to announce.

Q (Off mike.) changed since then? What's still not agreed upon?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, you know, I'm not involved in that dialogue, between the provincial government and the Iraqi government. And so I'm really not the best person to outline, for you, the details that they may be finalizing.

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold at the Christian Science Monitor.

I just wondered if we could go back to the Sons of Iraq real quick. Do you expect a U.S. role in the meaningful jobs program you talked about? I mean, is it where -- would there be kind of a jobs Sons of Iraq program that the U.S. would play a role in?

GEN. AUSTIN: You know, we do have a role as we speak. We are trying to help the people that helped us. And so as we -- as opportunities are created in the communities, because of things that may be ongoing, in terms of reconstruction and that sort of business, we try to help vector some of the Sons of Iraq into those jobs that are emerging and so -- to make sure that we've got a good marriage of, you know, jobs that need filling and folks with the right qualifications to go into those jobs. But our leadership throughout the countryside is really on a daily basis helping those folks that have helped us to find jobs.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we have just about two minutes left. And before we close it, I wanted to turn it back to you, to see if there was anything you'd like to close with, or if any of the discussion here has stimulated some other thoughts, that perhaps you wanted to share with us, before we bring it to an end.

GEN. AUSTIN: I'd just like to say thanks to everyone for joining us today, and I appreciate your questions. I'd like to close by saying it is clear to me that there is a sense of normalcy that -- normalcy that's returning to Iraq, and it's returning because of the sustained low levels of attacks. And it's clear that the Iraqis have chosen to reject al Qaeda and the special groups criminals, and the Iraqi security forces are continuing to improve. I'm confident that we'll continue to make progress. And I think everyone knows that Iraq is a challenging and continuously changing environment, but I'm very optimistic about the future of this country.

I'd also like to say that our men and women in uniform, as well as our civilian counterparts, are doing tremendous work here seven days a week.

If I could, I'd also like to say thank you to the family members who remain at home. We appreciate your sacrifices. And thank you for being here, and I look forward to talking to everyone again in the future. Again, thanks.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, general and -- for your time today but, just as importantly, for your support of having your subordinate commanders join us in this forum and give us the type of context that only commanders on the ground are able to do. So we appreciate your support with your division commanders and your brigade combat team commanders, and we hope to have you back here very soon too.



GEN. AUSTIN: Thanks a lot, Bryan. We'll see you next time.

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